

Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman
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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

Strikes, Mathematics & Religion

Over the last week, three controversies have served to undermine confidence in the effectiveness of state education: the threat of strike action by secondary teachers, the decline in primary school children's maths skills, and a religious instruction debacle that looks set to result in a massively unworkable bureaucratic nightmare!

The government spends over \$10 billion a year on education. That is 20 percent of all government expenditure. Three quarters of a million children are provided with 2,500 schools - roughly the same number of Ministry of Education bureaucrats - and some 50,000 or so teachers. However, in spite of 12 years of compulsory education, a growing number of young people are leaving our state schools functionally illiterate - they are unable to read, write, do basic arithmetic, or even speak coherently. Without the skills to get a good job, these youngsters are effectively being jettisoned - by the Government - onto the human scrap heap of unemployment and crime.

The secondary teachers union, the PPTA, threatened this week to take strike action over the dangerous and disruptive behaviour of these marginalised students. They claim that they are no longer prepared to tolerate their threats, intimidation and violence. These are largely the children of New Zealand's growing underclass - never-married mothers dependent on welfare, raising children without the support of their father. Lacking a male role model, adequate supervision, and respect for authority, the challenging conduct of these children is creating serious difficulties for schools that are increasingly unable to use traditional disciplinary methods.

New Zealand is not alone in facing these issues: just this week the Times has reported the Chairman of the British Youth Justice Board saying that "it is time to confront the political correctness in schools that prevents teachers from disciplining pupils in the way that they used to - in part because they fear that parents will challenge

them and even take legal action". To read article see www.nzcpd.com.

Well-known British doctor and author Theodore Dalrymple, in a City Journal column We Don't Want No Education, sheds some light on why children born into the underclass have little regard for education:

"There is one great psychological advantage to the white underclass in their disdain for education: it enables them to maintain the fiction that the society around them is grossly, even grotesquely, unjust, and that they themselves are the victims of this injustice. If, on the contrary, education were seen by them as a means available to all to

rise in the world, as indeed it could be and is in many societies, their whole viewpoint would naturally have to change. Instead of attributing their misfortunes to others, they would have to look inward, which is always a painful process. Here we see the reason why scholastic success is violently discouraged, and those who pursue it persecuted, in underclass schools: for it is perceived, inchoately no doubt, as a threat to an entire

Weltanschauung [worldview]. The success of one is a reproach to all." To read article see www.nzcpd.com

The result of the government's four-yearly progress report in the teaching of mathematics was released this week: the University of Otago's National Education Monitoring Project, showed that the ability of primary school children to deal with everyday number skills such as addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, as well as fractions and percentages, had shown a marked decline (to read the full report see www.nzcpd.com). The Ministry of Education claim this is due in part to a shift in teaching emphasis away from basic number skills such as learning the times tables, towards a better understanding of mathematical concepts. This, however, is akin to expecting children to learn to read without teaching them the alphabet first - it doesn't work!

Having taught mathematics for twenty years, I am

a strong believer that children need to learn the basics really well so they can develop the confidence in numbers and calculation that will enable them to move onto higher mathematical concepts (Zenith, the number game - see www.pursuit.co.nz - that makes mathematics practice fun, was developed by my husband and I in order to help our own children improve their number skills and confidence - it worked brilliantly!). Any move away developing that confidence in the basics, is counterproductive, as we found to our cost when the Ministry of Education changed the teaching of reading away from the tried and tested phonics approach, to the new whole-word recognition methodology, to the detriment of the learning of generations of children.

The third controversy of the week, involves a bureaucratic reaction that can only be described as political correctness gone mad: the Ministry of Education is proposing to replace the consent system for religious instruction in primary schools - which by law are secular - with one that promises to become an unworkable bureaucratic nightmare. (If you would like to see the Ministry of Education's briefing paper to the Select Committee see www.nzcpd.com).

As a result of a single complaint sent by parents to a Parliamentary Select Committee, rather than dealing directly with families and schools where difficulties arise, the Ministry of Education is proposing to change the system for all schools from one that needs parental permission to 'opt-out' of any voluntary religious activity, to one that needs permission to 'opt-in'. This would result in all of the children who want to participate needing to bring permission slips from

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home, and with New Zealand being a largely Christian society with over two million Christians according to the 2001 Census (Hindus - 40,000, Buddhists - 42,000, Islam - 24,000, Spiritualism- 16,000), not only will this create a huge waste of teacher time and effort, but there will be enormous frustration and distress as notes are forgotten and children who really wanted to attend are excluded.

In response to the proposal to introduce more rules and regulations, Pat Newman, the President of the Primary School Principals' Federation, has questioned why primary and intermediate schools, in this day and age, are treated any differently from secondary schools? While the formal teaching of religion has been banned in primary schools since 1877, with limited voluntary activities only allowed outside of regular school hours, the law for secondary schools is very flexible, giving a secondary school Board complete discretion "to control the management of the school as it thinks fit". Pat believes it is long past time for primary and intermediate schools to be treated the same way as secondary schools. I agree with him. What do you think?

The poll this week: *Is it time to give primary schools the same flexibility regarding religious instruction as secondary schools: "that the school's Board has complete discretion to control the management of the school as it thinks fit?"*

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